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Patching a leaky pipeline

The diagnosis is clear: women are underrepresented in science. And a 'leaky pipeline' means that for those women who do move into this sector, disproportionately fewer of them will rise to the top. Two broad treatments now exist — tackle the symptoms or grapple with the cause. Dealing with the symptoms seems to be easier, but can be less effective. For example, under its Sixth Framework Programme, the European Commission is encouraging academia and industry to hire and promote more women (see *Nature* 426, 210–211; 2003). But systems of quotas can cause resentment.

Instead, treating the individual causes — such as women who temporarily step off the tenure ladder to start a family and find it difficult to climb back on — could be a more successful course of action. In the United States, organizations such as the Association for Women in Science (www.awis.org) and philanthropies including the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (www.sloan.org) have been aggressive in attacking this problem through creative grant schemes.

More recently, European organizations have joined the fray. The European Molecular Biology Organization offers a 'restart' grant, Britain has the Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships and the Swiss National Science Foundation awards the Marie Heim-Vögtlin grants. These programmes are beginning to yield success stories (see *Nature Med.* 10, 114–115; 2004).

But they could still be more widespread — encompassing a greater number of countries. And those programmes that do exist in individual countries might be better promoted under a 'European women in science' umbrella. Finally, 'restart' grants, as beneficial as they are, address only one cause of women's underrepresentation in science. Other issues — covert and overt, unintentional or not — still exist in institutions in many parts of the world. Addressing them will help more women to enter science, and rise to the top.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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